DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 320 107 CS 010 080

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TITLE Using Literature To Develop Critical Thinking.
PUB DATE May 90
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association (35th, Atlanta, GA, May 6-11, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Childrens Literature; Critical Reading; *Critical Thinking; Elementary Education; Grade 2; Grade 4; Grade 5; *Questioning Techniques; *Reading Attitudes; *Reading Instruction; *Reading Skills; *Supplementary Reading Materials; Thinking Skills; Whole Language Approach
IDENTIFIERS *Student Selected Materials

ABSTRACT

A study tested a questioning technique for teaching critical thinking strategies in a class with student-selected reading materials. Teacher modeling, class discussion, writing, and reading were connected in the process. The pre-test and posttest included student-generated questions and character sketches. Quality of the pre- and posttest questions and the character sketches were analyzed for 50 fourth- and fifth-grade students. Results indicated that gains were made in skill areas and in attitude toward reading. The process has been successful with high, average, and low ability readers in second, fourth, and fifth grades. (MG)

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USING LITERATURE TO DEVELOP CRITICAL THINKING

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CRITICAL THINKING IN WHOLE LANGUAGE CLASS

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Abstract

This article presents a questioning technique for teaching critical think strategies in a class with student-selected reading materials. The process was successful with high, average, and low ability readers in second, fourth, and fifth grades. Teacher modeling, class discussion, writing and reading were connected in the process. The pre-test and posttest included student-generated questions and character sketches. Gains were made in skill areas and in attitude toward reading.

USING LITERATURE TO DEVELOP CRITICAL THINKING

As a teacher of reading, my goal has been to promote literacy. I want my students to develop comprehension strategies that focus on critical thinking. A whole language approach seemed to fit my goal; however, I was not sure how to manage comprehension instruction. Then I began to look at class discussion, questioning, and writing to encourage students to think critically. A fourth grade teacher, Beverly Miller, and I planned a process for skills instruction. In this article I will share this simple process for guiding students through skills while allowing them to use any book they happen to be reading. The process has been used successfully at second, fourth and fifth grades. It began in a whole language staff development class.

Changing from the Basal to a Literature-Based Program

Because we wanted to know more about the whole language approach, several of the teachers in our school participated in a staff development course in whole language. We became a support group as we studied, encouraging each other as we changed our teaching methods.

We were excited about students having the freedom to select their own books to read. Student selections capitalize on their interests and help them learn to love reading and to become

life-long readers. Goodman (1976) and Hansen(1987) found that comprehension is dependent on prior knowledge. Hansen and Pearson (1980) found that students were more likely to make spontaneous inferences when there was a connection between what they knew before and what was in the text. Students selecting their own reading material are more likely to have some existing knowledge to tie new learning to, thus facilitating comprehension. Therefore, it seems sensible to permit self-selection of reading material.

Even though students were allowed to select their own books, we realized that the students still had to have skill instruction. The question was, how could be teach the skills without going back to the workbooks and skillsheets in the basal series? Research suggests that reading skills instruction should be related to the books and writing of the children (Chomsky, 1978; Holdaway, 1982; and Larrick, 1987). But how could we guide students through necessary reading skills when each one was reading a different book? In our search for an answer, we looked at the relationship of questioning and critical thinking.

Good Questioning Techniques to Develop Critical Thinking

We found that researchers were recommending integration of reading and writing instruction, good questioning techniques, andimproved class discussion to encourage the development of critical thinking (Burnett and Berg,1987 and Lehr,1982). In <u>When Writers Read</u>, Jane Hansen writes about the importance of

good quality of questions asked of the reader. Tierney, Soter, O'Flahavan and McGinley (1989) have reported positive results on the combination of reading and writing, which they say "afforded students the opportunities to think more critically." Nessel (1987) recommends a comprehension questioning strategy to help students access prior knowledge.

We found examples of some "generic" questions in a book called Teaching Reading and Writing Together, by Smith and Dahl. These questions were intended to foster critical thinking using any reading material. Beverly and I decided to use the questions presented by Smith and Dahl for an experiment in out fourth and fifth grade classrooms. We wanted to emphasize comprehension strategies and encourage students to become independent critical thinkers.

The Process

We used some of Smith and Dahl's questions to guide our classes in learning and demonstrating knowledge of seven different critical thinking skills, opinion, fact and opinion, comparison, contrast, cause and effect, conclusions , and inference. We printed the questions on cards, one for each skill, which we posted in a wall display in the classroom where students had easy access to them.

We began presenting the skills in a whole class lesson. Using a book we were reading to the class, we answered the questions on the card for the class, modeling the way the cards

were to be used. During that same class period we asked the students to use the books they were reading independently to answer quesions orally, still guiding practice and allowing the students to model for each other.

Next we moved to writing about the books using the skill cards. We presented one skill to the class in a "mini-lesson", modeling again our own response. The students read their own books and then wrote in their reading response logs about their own book. These written responses were shared in small groups of five or fewer students. The groups were formed by students reading the same book, different books by the same author, or the same type of book, such as poetry, or books on the same topic, such as sports. Thus, the group members had some basis for comparison with each other. As each student shared, the other in the group would let them know if their answers were logical or if they might need to change something in their writing. Then we teachers read the response and wrote back to each student about what they had written. We also placed a sticker on the class chart for the skills each student had demonstrated. The chart encouraged the students because they could see their progress and the progress of others in the class.

Encouraging Independence

Students also used the cards for peer conferences. The cards were written in such a way that they would guide the peer with questions to ask his or her classmate. The chart showing

who had demonstrated each skill was helpful to the students, because if one student had a problem with one card, the chart made it easy for the student to see who might be best for peer conferencing. This process helped create a community of readers, who worked together to encourage one another. Students were aware of books other students were reading because they had shared in small groups. Student morale was high, because one student would compliment another by asking for help on a skill. Students were also recommending books and authors to one another and planning books they would read and discuss together. The enthusiasm for reading was contagious.

As students became familiar with the skill cards and had demonstrated competence in each skill area, they were encouraged to choose their own skill cards more. The schedule changed to mini-lesson, reading, writing, and peer conference followed by more writing. Following the class instruction time, the teacher held individual conferences. The students were required to bring their written responses to the questions to the conference. Other responses might be given verbally, but at least one written response in a complete sentence was required.Students were encouraged to write on several skills each day, because we did not want them seeing the isolation, but rather the connection between the skills.

Writing A Character Sketch

We also wanted the students to think critically about the stories as a whole, analyzing what makes a story good, and what an author includes to draw the reader into the story. In addition to focusing on these skill areas we had students write character sketches, because we felt character analysis summarized all of the skills. To write the character sketch, the student had to look at the story as a whole, collect information about the character, analyze the feelings and actions of the character, and finally describe him or her. A good character sketch could include opinions supported by facts in the story, comparisons of the character with other characters or real people, inferences about what the character might do in other situations, causes for actions of the character and results ofthose actions,contrast between this and other characters, conclusions about the character and finally the student's opinion about the character. Our goal was to have the children write a good character sketch and formulate questions concerning critical thinking skills, not just questions based on facts.

Assessment

In order to assess the improvement based on our instruction, we asked the children to read a story and write a character sketch as well as five questions a teacher might ask a student concerning the story. After 5 months of instruction and without

discussing the story, we had the students repeat the same process with the same story. We used the same story as we had for the pretest because we felt this would alleviate the possibility of a different story having a different interest level for a particular student. We did not discuss the story at any time as we felt discussion would invalidate the results of the testing. We assumed students would use the critical thinking skills in which they had been instructed when they developed their five questions rather than literal questions such as those which had been used in the pretest. In addition to writing five questions, the students also wrote another character sketch.

Results

With fifty fourth and fifth graders, we analyzed the quality the pre-test and posttest questions and the statements in the character sketches. The pretest questions were mostly text-explicit, with few even calling for an opinion, and no questions asking for inference or conclusions.

PERCENTAGES OF QUESTIONS IN EACH SKILL AREA

	PRETEST 11/16/87	POSTTEST 3/25/88
LITERAL RECALL	85	50
OPINION	9	20
OPINION JUSTIFIED BY FACTS	2	10
COMPARISON/CONTRAST	2	10
CAUSE/EFFECT	1	2
CONCLUSIONS	0	6
INFERENCE	1	2

We analyzed the quality of the statements included in each character sketch, classifying them according to the skills for which instruction had been given. We found the students had written more literal facts when pretested. There were no statements of cause and effect, inference or conclusions in the pretest. The following table shows the total number of statements in each skill area.

ANALYSIS OF CHARACTER SKETCHES
NUMBER OF STATEMENTS IN EACH SKILL AREA

	PRETEST 11/16/87	POSTTEST 3/25/88
FACTS	94	80
OPINIONS	38	86
OPINIONS JUSTIFIED BY FACTS	11	65
COMPARISON/CONTRAST	3	14
CAUSE/EFFECT	0	8
INFERENCE	0	13
CONCLUSIONS	0	10

Posttest questions were more varied, and students wrote more opinions for the posttest. Almost half of the opinions were justified by facts from the stories, and there were statements of cause and effect, inference and conclusions in the posttest.

No limitations were placed on the length of the character sketches; therefore, the writing varied from one page to four. In counting our skills, therefore, we counted statements of ideas incorporated in the writing, whether one sentence or three sentences. We counted statements in this manner because we were looking for quality, not quantity.

Attitude Surveys

We also surveyed students and their parents regarding their attitudes toward reading and changes which had occurred over the year as a result of whole language instruction. On the student surveys, 73% of the students said the amount of time they read at home had increased, while 83% said their interest in books had

increased. The students indicated that reading was still not chosen over television, but 53% said they talked more about books to family and friends. Excitement about reading had increased for 73% of the students, and 89% felt their reading skills had increased.

Parents also indicated that there had been little change in the amount of television time, but 73% saw an increase in the amount of time reading was done for pleasure. An increase in interest in books and reading abilities as well as enthusiasm for reading was noted by 79% of the parents. Positive overall attitude toward reading was noted by 88% of the parents. Over half of the free responses on the surveys mentioned the teacher or the change in reading program as the factor which made the difference for their child.

Positive comments noted by the students in their free response section included "Reading is . . . " "exciting," "terrific," "superduper," and "great." Ninety-two percent of the responses to the "Reading is . . ." statement were positive. Several students made positive comments about self-selection as making the difference between liking or disliking reading this year.

A New Year, More Objectives

We continued to use the process. The next year, both of us taught fifth grade and continued to see similar results. This year, Beverly continues in fifth, while I moved to second. We

extended the study by writing more skill cards, for a total of eighteen, in an attempt to meet all of the objectives in the comprehension and literature appreciation areas of our curriculum guide. In addition to the seven skill areas from the previous year, the following were added: main idea, time and place, sequence, predicting outcomes, character analysis, character development, character's motive, vocabulary development, type of literature, author's purpose and author's style. Here is an example of one of the cards and two students' responses from their books:

PREDICTING OUTCOMES

One way good writers keep you
interested in reading their story
is by giving you clues about what
is coming next. Read part of a
book. Write down guesses about
what will happen. Tell clues that
helped you make your guesses.
Read on to see if you were correct.

In response to <u>There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom</u> by Louis Sacher, Brian wrote: "I think that the story will be a hapilly ever after. Because Bradly is gona try to live without Carla. I think he can do it. Do You?"

About Beverly Cleary's <u>Beezus and Ramona</u>, Brian wrote: "I think that Ramona's sister is going to tell on her. Because she

looked strange." Later he wrote: "Ramona's sister did not tell."

We decided to show examples of students' writing on the pre-test and posttest to give a clearer picture of the development of the students. These three students are representative of high, average and low ability readers in a second grade class. Progress which they made during the year is shown from their pre-test and posttest, as well as the attitude surveys done at the end of the study.

Jason

Jason is a high ability reader. He came to second grade preferring to read silently rather than listen in class. He loved to read already, but was not used to responding to stories. In November, Jason's idea of questions "a teacher would ask" were literal level (text-explicit) questions. Here are his November questions:

1. What came after Apirl in the story?
2. Why did toad stand on his head?
3. Who brout the button with two holes?
4. Who came to look at toad after the lizeds?
5. What did frog put on the envolope?

At the end of March, his questions showed he had really begun trying to put himself into the story:

1. Did you like the story called A Swim?
2. What was your favirite part in the whol book?
3. Do you like getting letters like toad got from frog?
4. I don't like losing things like toad who lost his button. Do you?
5. Is Arnold Lobel your favirite author?

In November, Jason wrote only one sentence about Toad in his character sketch:

Toad is funny because he banged his head aganst the wall.

In March, he wrote two pages:

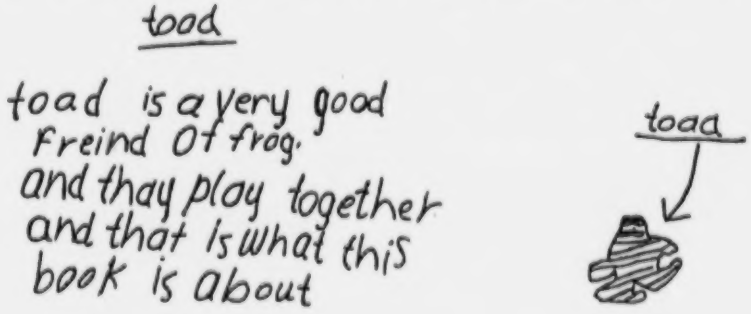
I think toad is a funny character because he stands on his head to think of a story to tell frog. Sometimes he's shy like in the story A Swim but most of the time he's not Sometimes he's nice but sometimes he's not nice. Toad and frog don't look alike because ones a toad and ones a frog. There alike Somehow because they both like to take walks, Toad wears a bathing suit when he swims but frog does not wear a bathing suit. One problem that they both have is that both of them want each other to tell each of them a story. Toad is shy in one part of the story and frog not shy at all. I expect that if I read onhter one of his books it would be funny like this one was.

As a student, Jason is much more outgoing now than at the beginning of the year. He participates actively in discussions, openly voicing his opinions whereas before he seemed reluctant to offer ideas. His self-confidence has improved tremendously.

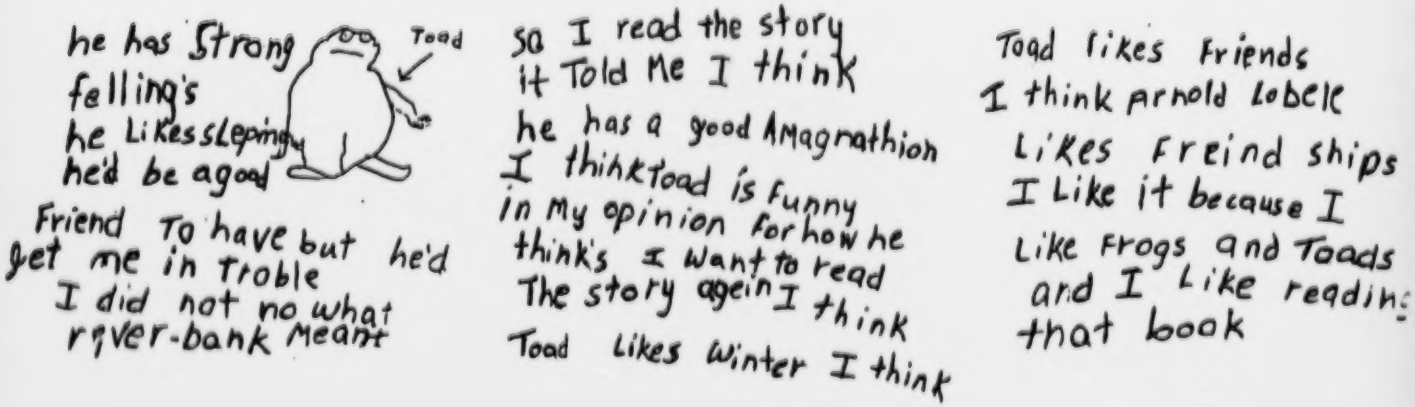
On his survey, Jason stated "Things I like about reading are that when I read a good book I don't want to stop reading until I'm done with the book. Things I do NOT like about reading are when I have to write about a very short book." Jason said after the posttest that he did not like trying to write about Toad and Frog are Friends. His statements indicate an understanding about the reading and writing connection an critical thinking. He said,"Because Frog and Toad is shorter, and Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe is longer and I can really think about what I'm writing if we read longer books because they tell more details in Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe than they do in Frog and Toad." Jason's parents' survey indicated an increase in the amount Jason talks about books at home and the use of the library and request to purchase books.

Tyler

Tyler is an average reader who was a reluctant writer at the beginning of second grade. His character sketch in November was simple:



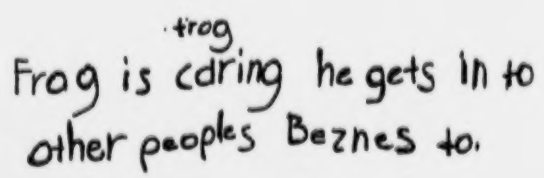
By the end of March, Tyler was "competing" to see how many skill cards he could include in his writing each day. His final character sketch shows quite an improvement:



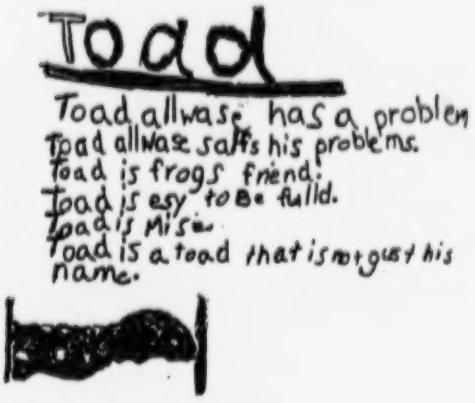
During the taped session following the posttest, Tyler said,"I think . . . they talk more about the character and their feelings like if they're sad or if they're happy and what they look like, so it's easier to write about 'em." Tyler expressed an interest in picturing the character in his mind, which made it easier for him to write about. He sees reading as meaning-centered, an interactive process between writer and reader. Tyler has become so excited about reading, he made a wish list of books and gave it to his Dad, requesting choices from the list for future presents. This is quite a change from the reader who had trouble finding <u>any</u> book he wanted to read!

Derrick

Derrick was new to the school this year, and came to second grade reading below the others in the class. His November character sketch showed some thought, but it was short:



In March, Derrick wrote about Toad:


Toad
Toad allwase has a problem
Toad allwase salfs his problems.
Toad is frogs friend.
Toad is esy to be fulld.
Toad is Mise.
Toad is a toad that is not just his name.

After the posttest, Derrick said he had found the writing difficult: " . . . it didn't tell much about the character in five stories, and . . . it wasn't actually in sequence sort of." Derrick's parents stated that his interest in books and his reading abilities have "greatly increased" since last year.

Responses to the Posttest

The students' responses following the posttest told us that because our choice of text contained five separate stories, the writing was more difficult than if there had been one long story. Sarah's comment was one most of the class agreed with: "When you're reading Frog and Toad Are Friends like you'll read one story and then you want to know what else happened and you'll go straight to another one and you don't know much about what happened in that story and what the characters feel like." The

selection of the text was an attempt to provide a book which had clear characters and readability level which all students in the class could comprehend. But even the slower readers wanted a longer story.

Students' comments also indicated a desire to talk about the book before they wrote. Lauren said," . . . usually . . . we'll talk about the book some. After you read Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe . . . we usually talk about what the characters did and . . . what might happen to the character next, and how the character was feeling during that chapter or two chapters or how ever much you read." Nicole agreed."Yeah, because you were seeing if we could think about it in our mind (on the posttest) and it's really hard because we don't have anybody to talk to. You can't tell them what you think's gonna happen." The students perceived "book talk" as instrumental for good writing about their reading.

Classroom Suggestions

(1) Teachers can use good questioning techniques to develop critical thinking skills regardless of the reading material used. The method presented in this article can help to relate skills instruction to books and writing of the children.

(2) Whole-class instruction for skills development will allow for class discussion, which encourages development of critical thinking. Students listen to each other's ideas and confirm their own answers, or decide to change their predictions.

(3) Students who are instructed using this technique will form a community of readers eager to share predictions and conclusions about their reading. Reading time becomes an exciting part of the day. The excitement about reading goes home as well. We even found students wanted to take the books they were reading to lunch!

Reading skills instruction which is done in the manner described in this report will have the added benefit of helping to create more independent, competent readers. The process of allowing self-selection of books for learning and demonstrating skills seems to help students feel more in control of their learning. Students also seemed to enjoy reading more, and as a result, read more. If our ultimate goal is to have students become literate adults who choose to read, then this method seems to be an appropriate way for teaching skills, a way which will turn students <u>on</u> to reading instead of turning them off. These students are well on their way to becoming life-long readers and critical thinkers!

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